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ABSTRACT

Independent reading can serve as a practical context for linking vocabulary and comprehension and is a feasible strategy that complements other instructional approaches while it expands word knowledge in a naturalistic setting. Teachers should serve as reading models while students engage in silent reading, but teachers should also be cautious about overdoing modeling since it could displace independent reading. At times, the teacher may vary the modeling of silent reading by demonstrating to students ways in which context plays a role in grasping the meaning of words. What is needed is a balance of encouraging a wide and varied reading as much as possible and of using modeling at appropriate times in clear, demonstrative, and motivational ways. (Fifteen references, a model, and a brief outline of the paper are attached.) (RS)

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Linking Vocabulary and Comprehension
through Independent Reading

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Vocabulary knowledge is a necessary part of reading comprehension. Teachers intuitively assume that students with extensive word knowledge are more likely to read with understanding and fluency. While realizing the importance of this relationship, teachers are often unsure about the best approaches and the amount of time and energy needed for effective instruction.

Part of this uncertainty lies in several seemingly contradictory findings. For example, students must have a varied and deep knowledge of vocabulary for effective comprehension of text. Yet, if teachers were to engage learners in intensive vocabulary instruction, this approach would not only be time consuming but also result in the learning of a minimal number of words. (Graves and Prenn, 1986; Herman and Dole, 1988) In fact, teachers who attempt explicit coverage of all new words in basal readers will probably teach less than 500 words each year. (Nagy and Herman, 1987) Since average students in grades 3-12 gain an awareness of about 3000 words per year (Nagy and Herman, 1987), apparently much vocabulary is learned incidentally through other means, such as the reading of school materials without direct instructional intervention. (Nagy, 1988; Nagy, et al., 1985a, 1985b) In addition, common sense suggests that too much emphasis on intensive teaching of word meanings may displace other important activities, including reading for pleasure.

Vocabulary and Independent Reading

These findings are not as contradictory as they are complementary, especially if teachers guide students to link vocabulary and independent reading. Although free reading is no guarantee that individuals will improve their vocabulary and comprehension, extensive reading provides three essential properties of vocabulary instruction: integration, repetition, and meaningful use. The essence of integration is that knowledge is structured by sets of relationships and that readers comprehend new information by relating it to their prior knowledge. Repetition is important because the more exposure and facility readers have with words the more attention they give to comprehension. Providing students with substantial exposure to new words, however, is especially effective if students use the words meaningfully. Thus, dealing with the words in context is more beneficial than merely defining the words in isolation.

Interestingly, independent reading that is frequent and extensive can support these properties of powerful vocabulary instruction. According to Nagy (1988, p.31):

Consider the first property, integration--the need to relate the meaning of a new word to students' prior knowledge. If the reader is largely successful in comprehending the text containing the new word, then the new word is being tied in with the reader's prior knowledge; most of the words and

the concepts in the text are already at least partly familiar. As for repetition, whether reading supplies this for a new word depends on how much the student is reading and whether the new word is repeated. If the most important words for a student to learn are those that do occur repeatedly, reading will supply the necessary repetition. And of course in reading, one makes meaningful use of words. Reading is the best practice for reading.

One way of applying these characteristics to independent reading is to provide school time for reading a wide variety of books concerning instructional topics in the content areas. Thus, if the American Civil War is the unit being covered in social studies, then the classroom library should contain materials related to slavery, abolitionism, Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, General Ulysses S. Grant, General Robert E. Lee, the Union, the Confederacy, Fort Sumter, the Battle of Bull Run, and other pertinent areas. Students are more likely to read these resources if they are written at varied levels and if they consist of different lengths and formats. At the completion of the unit, the teacher engages students in an active discussion of the American Civil War and places their comments on the chalkboard to form a post-reading semantic map. The reading experience and the semantic map can fulfill content area requirements, expand word knowledge, and support the lifetime reading habit. Frequent

independent reading also supplies integration, repetition, and meaningful use.

Providing school time for reading, however, requires commitment and careful planning. At least 5 books per student are needed for the classroom library, and they should be related to specific content area topics. The school library media specialist is a vital resource in working cooperatively with teachers to select appropriate materials. Based on the subject-matter demands and the teacher's flexibility, reading time is provided for significant blocks of time or for segments of class periods. For example, an ambitious approach would permit independent reading in a content area classroom for 5 weeks, with the remaining 35 weeks of the school year designated for other instructional activities. Conversely, the teacher can develop a temporary minilibrary which relates to a current topic of study, and students could self select and read materials concerning the topic during the last 10 minutes of each lesson. Regardless of the time allocation, the teacher should serve as a reading model while students are engaged in silent reading. (Sanacore, 1988; Spiegel, 1981).

Using Modeling to Support Context

At times, the teacher may vary the modeling of silent reading by demonstrating to students ways in which context plays a role in grasping the meaning of words. Using a passage being read, the teacher engages in contextual strategies while students follow along with a transparency or duplicated material. Modeling

sessions could be organized to reveal the following:

1. Certain words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs help to determine the meaning of some new words and concepts.

The teacher thinks aloud as he/she attempts to grasp an awareness of a key word through its context. Here, the teacher notes that context may be helpful in making an inference concerning peripheral rather than explicit meaning. He/she also suggests that peripheral meaning is probably sufficient for understanding the whole selection. Then, the teacher encourages students to use context while reading their self-selected books.

2. Reading whole selections increases an awareness that thorough knowledge of all words is unimportant. The teacher reads a passage aloud and indicates that he/she is unsure of certain word meanings. Then the teacher says, "Instead of trying to figure them out, I am going to put light marks by these words and to continue reading." At the completion of the selection, the teacher summarizes the author's ideas and discusses the marked words. "Do I know what these words are now?" "What about the words I am still unsure of?" "Are these important to understanding the selection?" The teacher then shows that many of the words he/she already knows incidentally, that some of the words still causing difficulty may or may not be necessary for understanding the passage, and that context is not always helpful in determining the

meaning of new words. Decisions, therefore, have to be made, and approaches to gaining the meaning of some words have to be considered. These strategies reflect a variation of Vacca, Vacca, and Gove's (1987, p.217) suggestions to be used by students for word identification purposes. These strategies, however, can also be employed by teachers for modeling an awareness that knowing the meaning of all words in a selection is unnecessary for comprehension. After the modeling, students derive additional benefits from practicing with the teacher's guidance until they are able to use context discriminatingly and independently.

3. Context can support other approaches to learning unfamiliar words independently. The teacher carefully selects a passage with words consisting of prefixes, roots, and suffixes that do not reveal meaning on the basis of word structure. Nagy (1988, p.38) provides a striking example: "knowing that abs means 'away from' and tract means 'to draw, pull' is not likely to help a student encountering the word abstract for the first time." After selecting the passage, the teacher reads it aloud and attempts to determine the meaning of key words through their word parts. When this fails, context is used as another option or strategy for determining the word meanings. The teacher reminds students that although word structure is an important strategy for independent word learning, context is also useful and complementary especially

when word parts do not provide clues to intended meanings. Students are then motivated to use context during independent reading as a support system for unlocking the meaning of words.

4. For comprehension to occur, vocabulary and prior knowledge must interact. According to Adams and Bruce (1982, p.23), "Without prior knowledge, a complex object, such as a text, is not just difficult to interpret; strictly speaking, it is meaningless." The classroom teacher can help students to activate their prior knowledge (or schemata) of a text by using a variation of a prereading plan referred to as PReP. (Langer, 1981) For example, the teacher thinks aloud indicating that before reading the book, he/she is going to skim and become aware of the title and subtitles as well as the key words, phrases, and pictures. Then, the teacher says, "I am going to say anything that comes to my mind when I see the word _____." For the purpose of clarification, responses are placed on the chalkboard. Afterward, the teacher says, "I want to think more deeply about these responses." Thus, certain words are weighed, accepted, revised, rejected, or integrated. Finally, the teacher says, "Based on these thoughts and before I read my book, do I have any new ideas about _____?" Here, more elaboration, revision, or refinement is noted. Although Langer's PReP is intended as a teacher-directed activity, appropriate teacher modeling can encourage students to use a variation for the purpose of

integrating their prior knowledge with their self-selected text. As with other approaches that focus on context, guided practice is essential.

5. The intonation a reader brings to a text can affect the importance and meaning of words. Pitch, stress, and juncture are aspects of intonation that determine a reader's interpretation of text. Lefevre (1964, pp. 74-75) provides a classic example: "I did not say you stole my red bandana." In this sentence, when the word I is highlighted, the implied meaning is "someone else said it." Conversely, when the word you is emphasized, the interpretation is likely to be "someone else stole it." The teacher can increase students' sensitivity to intonation by demonstrating its use while reading aloud. Since intonational patterns are especially useful for interpreting dialogue, the teacher selects dialogues from a book and highlights specific words. The children are then challenged to make inferences about intended meanings and to apply this skill to their own books. Students also should have opportunities to practice the skill with different materials in varied content areas. Linking intonation with word meaning reflects one of the basic linguistic principles which views reading as a graphic representation of speech. Students who are frequently exposed to this process gain important insights concerning the comprehension act.

These five modeling approaches support the role of context. Teachers, however, should be aware that these approaches are most effective when students believe they can imitate them and actually want to imitate them. (Schunk, 1987; Winograd and Paris, 1988-1989; Winograd and Smith, 1987) Teachers also should be cautious about overdoing modeling since it could displace independent reading and negate its philosophy. What is needed is a balance of encouraging wide and varied reading as much as possible and of using modeling at appropriate times in clear, demonstrative, and motivational ways.

Summary

Independent reading can serve as a practical context for linking vocabulary and comprehension. This idea is not new, nor is it meant to preclude explicit instructional approaches. Independent reading is simply a feasible strategy that complements other approaches while it expands word knowledge in a naturalistic setting.

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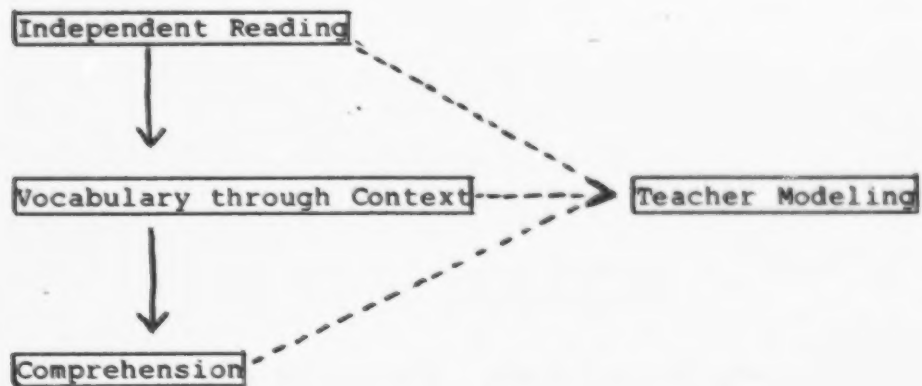
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Linking Independent Reading, Vocabulary, and Comprehension



Highlights of Independent Reading as a Context
for Enhancing Vocabulary and Comprehension

1. Extensive independent reading supports integration, repetition, and meaningful use
 2. Providing school time for free reading is essential
 3. The teacher serves as a reading model during silent reading and also varies modeling/practice sessions to increase students' awareness of the following:
 - A. Context is usually helpful in grasping the peripheral meaning of words
 - B. Knowing the meaning of all words in a selection is unnecessary for comprehension
 - C. Context can complement other approaches, such as word structure analysis
 - D. Since the comprehension act requires the interaction of vocabulary and schemata, a variation of PReP is a useful strategy for self-selected texts
 - E. Intonation affects the importance and meaning of words
 4. The teacher does not overdo the process of modeling
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